

September 1983

The Iowa History Magazine for Young People

Farmers Get Together

Bushels of wheat, yokes of oxen, native cattle, tubs of homemade soap, yards of fine linen cloth, apples, hand-crafted saddles, sturdy wagons—these and much more made up the display at Iowa's early county fairs.

Iowa's pioneer settlers brought the idea for an agricultural fair with them from their former homes. Not long after farmers had settled in the state, they got together to hold county fairs. It was a place to show off the best things that people made or raised. Those living on farms or in towns brought their finest products, hoping to win a top prize.

Makers of farm implements and housewares displayed their products at fairs. It was a good way to advertise in a time when people seldom traveled to shop in town and had no magazines, radios, or televisions. Products that won prizes were more likely to be purchased.

The county fair provided the best place for farm people to learn better farming methods. Men and women met to share their knowledge and to learn how to raise better cattle and improve crops. Fairs had an important educational purpose, indeed.

The county fair also provided a chance for socializing, entertainment, and relaxation. For farm dwellers the fair became an important yearly event. The only other major festive holiday was the Fourth of July. As the years passed, county fairs continued to be important educational and social events for rural Iowans.

Seven years after Iowa became a state, county agricultural leaders met to plan a state fair. The result of their meeting was the first state fair, a three-day event, held on six acres of land at Fairfield in October 1854.

PROGRAM

For the Clay County Fair and Picnic
Thursday, September 17, 1914

8:30	Band Music	Spencer Band
8:45	Lecture on Plowing	F.J. Sprung, Moline, Ill.
9:00	Plowing Contest	
9:30	To 11:30 Stock Judging	
10:30	Ball Game	Peterson vs. Webb
12:00	Barbecue	
1:30	Grand Stock Parade	
2:00	Band Music	Spencer Band
2:30	Children's Games	Mr. Cathcart, Y.M.C.A. Secretary of O'Brien County
2:30	Platform Program. Address of Welcome	Pres. Chas. Gilmore
	"Our Association"	W.A. Posey, County Agent
	Music	Meadow Glee Club
	Address	J.W. Coverdale, State Leader of County Work
	Address	Prof. Paul Taft, Ames College
	Music	Meadow Glee Club
	Address	Hon. D.W. Norris
	Song	Clay Co. Improvement Assoc. Miss Stella Green's School
4:00	Tug of War	
4:30	Gym Work	Lincoln Boy's Club
	The Spencer Band will furnish music all day.	
	A merry-go-round has been engaged for the children.	

PLOWING CONTEST

We would be pleased to have as many as will enter the plowing contest. If you have a good plow and can drive straight get in the contest. First prize \$42.50 John Deere plow. Second prize \$10.00. Third prize \$5.00.

Boys contest, boys sixteen or under, first prize \$10.00; second \$5.00.

STOCK SHOW

No entrance fees. Pens furnished free. Bring your good stock. It does not need to be registered. Help out with the show.

In the hog department an age boar class has been arranged for. Sweep stakes for all breeds. First \$7.50; second \$5.00.

If your cattle are halter broke we would be pleased to have them tied. Pens are prepared for cattle not halter broke.

BALL GAME

A purse of \$65.00 is offered the winners. Peterson and Webb have been playing good ball and we expect a hotly contested game.

BARBECUE

Preparations are being made for the biggest barbecue ever held in northwest Iowa. Orders have been given for the following:

- Two roast ox.
- 150 barrels of coffee.
- Two barrels of pickles.
- 20 boxes of sugar.

Bring your lunch baskets with trimmings and enjoy the County picnic dinner.

Hon. D.W. Norris, of Marshalltown, is an editor and manufacturer and will give us a splendid address on County Improvement work.

The Great State Fair

A midway spinning with rides and bustling with people, concession stands rich with cotton candy, foot-long hot dogs and sno cones, huge buildings filled with all kinds of displays and exhibits, barns alive with sleek, well-groomed animals—all greet the visitor's eye at the Iowa State Fair.

Each year hundreds of thousands of people from all over the Midwest visit the four hundred-acre fairgrounds. Here the best of Iowa's agriculture, industry, arts, and entertainment come together for the ten-day celebration. The fair has been a state tradition for over 125 years, and has come a long way since its simple beginnings.

Iowa's first fair was in Fairfield in October 1854. Six acres of land, a 250-foot-long shed, and a dirt racetrack hosted the simple livestock show of one hundred horses, eleven pigs, and a

handful of grain and implement displays. Nearly ten thousand Iowans traveled by foot, horseback, and covered wagon to this educational and social event. The main and only feature of entertainment was a women's riding competition, called **female equestrianism**.

In pioneering times, the fair location changed about every two years. This allowed farmers to visit the fair when it was held in their area without having to travel for several days and many miles. This also gave local manufacturers a better chance to display their products.

The state fair was strictly an agricultural event—a time and place for exhibiting and judging stock, grain, and other farm products. Men and women also

equestrianism *n.* — a person skilled at riding a horse.

exchanged farming experiences during the evening sessions held in the city hall or church. Activities such as gambling were discouraged.

By the late 1800s the Iowa State Fair began to change. Because of better transportation made possible by the new railroads and increased population, the planners believed it was time for the fair to have a home. In 1879 Des Moines was chosen as the permanent site for the Iowa State Fair. Although the main purpose of the fair was still the improvement of agriculture, more recreational activities and amusement features were added—fireworks, bicycle races, hog-calling competitions, fiddling contests, and even locomotive collisions were added to the ever-expanding fair program.



AN ARTIST'S SKETCH OF THE FIRST IOWA STATE FAIRGROUNDS AT FAIRFIELD.



THE PERMANENT IOWA STATE FAIRGROUNDS AT DES MOINES IN 1903.

Despite bad weather, poor harvests, and the beginning of World War I, this rapid growth peaked during the first thirty years of the 1900s. Because amusement and recreational activities were popular, more of these features came to the fairgrounds. Educational programs in areas other than agriculture became increasingly common, but agricultural education continued as the most important part of the fair. Ten new buildings were added to the grounds: the new Horticultural, Agricultural, and Dairy Building, constructed in 1904; the new Machinery Hall built in 1911; and the new Cattle Barn and Sale

Pavilion in 1920, housing the largest livestock show in the entire country. This show was so huge that in 1925 the Iowa State Fair and **Exposition** was renamed the Iowa State Fair and National Livestock Show.

In 1929 twenty-five thousand Iowans poured into the fairgrounds for the Diamond Jubilee celebration of the state fair's 75th anniversary, setting a new record in attendance and number of exhibits. Interest in the fair continued to reach new heights. Social clubs and

exposition n. — a large display of products, industrial and scientific equipment, or art.

volunteer groups such as the PTA and the Red Cross created displays, a new midway was built with more rides, and exciting musical shows and thrill events were featured. Building construction continued with a new poultry building. Machinery Hall was remodeled, and became the Varied Industries Building. Over five hundred people exhibited their products in the 111,000 square feet of space.

The jubilee years of the fair were brought to a sudden halt as World War II gripped the nation in the 1940s. Plans for the 1942 fair were cancelled, and the fair not held again until 1946. During this time the grounds were used for storing military equipment and ammunition.

When the air force trucks finally pulled out and the fair gates opened once again, Iowans packed the fairgrounds. It took time, however, for Iowans to readjust to peacetime, and interest in the fair dropped. In the 1950s the fair had even greater competition. With television in the family home and travel becoming quicker and more comfortable, people found other ways to spend their spare time. But the fair carried on, still emphasizing the importance of



WOMEN'S EQUESTRIANISM.

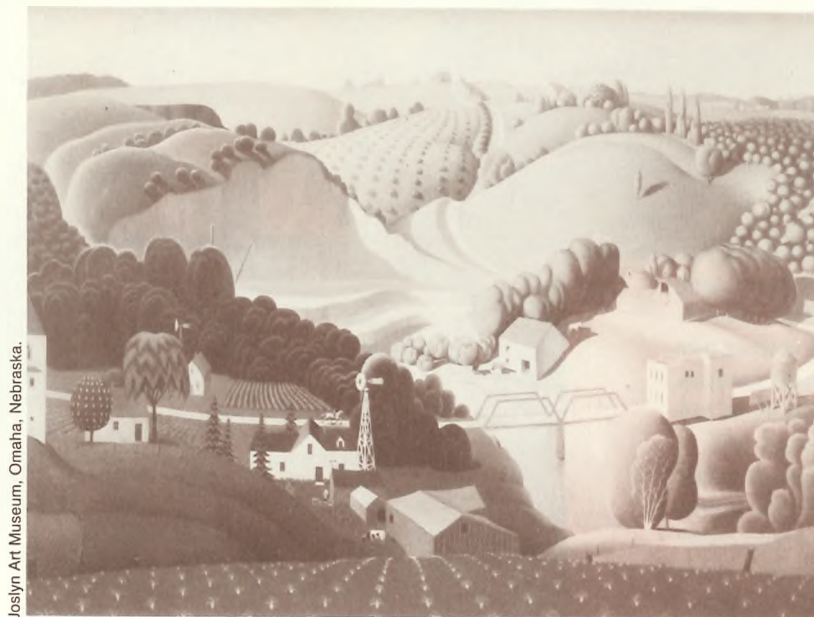
agriculture and highlighting industry. By the 1960s not only Iowans, but more people from other states and even other countries, began to show a new interest in the Iowa State Fair.

Today the Iowa State Fair is very different from the simple livestock show held in Fairfield in 1854. But even with the many changes and improvements, the purpose of the fair is still the same: the constant improvement of agriculture through education and the recognition of individual achievement.

—Ingrid Aanensen



Over the years the Iowa State Fair has ranked among the best in the nation. Author Phil Stong, who grew up in Van Buren County, wrote a novel based on the state fair experiences of an Iowa family. Three movies have been made based on State Fair. The first, filmed in 1932, used the grounds of the Iowa State Fair for its location. This picture shows Will Rogers and Janet Gaynor, who acted the parts of Abel and Margy Frake.



Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska.

Stone City, by Grant Wood, won first prize at the Iowa State Fair in 1930. The fair planners included awards for people with creative artistic ability. Paintings and drawings, handmade musical instruments, jewelry, photographs, and sculpture created an attractive display for fairgoers each year. Many of Iowa's finest artists won prizes at the state fair, including Grant Wood. He won first place in oil painting two years in a row before he received national recognition for his painting American Gothic.

Every year the award-winning livestock are paraded in front of the grandstand on the last day of the state fair. Here the winners of the 1931 fair proudly show their animals.



Spectators watch as proud owners show their beef cattle inside the livestock pavilion.

Looking at Livestock



Inside the swine barn owners use canes to control their Chester White hogs while judges look over each animal.



Contests related to regular farm work provided both entertainment and demonstrations of good skills. Plowing contests, hog-calling, horse-pulling, and sheepshearing competitions have attracted fairgoers over the years.

In the 1920s two professors from the Iowa Experiment Station at Ames designed a machine to measure the pulling power of horses. Soon horse-pulling became yet another contest at the fair.

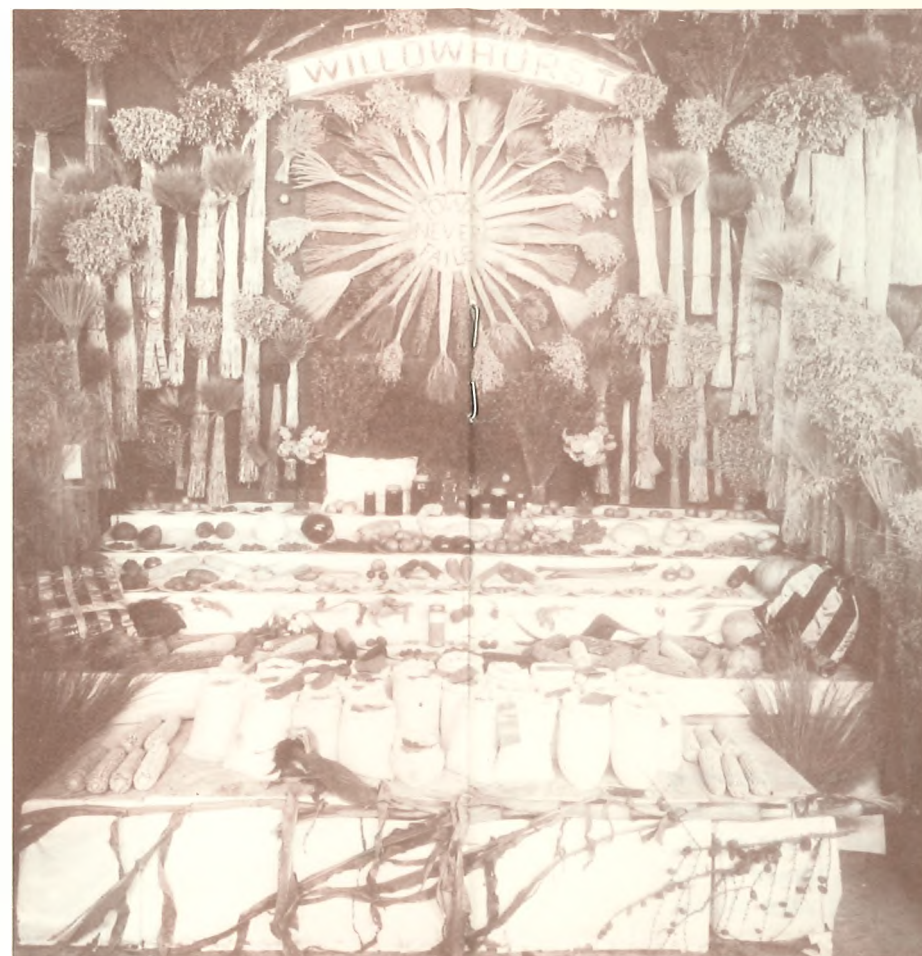
The hand-shearing contest has been a major feature of the sheep show for many years. Onlookers often gather around the ringside four and five deep to watch the contestants work. Good quality and a quick time are both required to be a winner.

Inside Agricultural Hall



The butter sculpture represents Iowa's fine dairy industry. Except for 1946, state fairgoers have viewed a newly-made sculpture for over fifty years. In that year, just after World War II ended, high butterfat prices and famine in Europe and Asia forced fair planners to cancel the sculpture.

famine n. — an extreme shortage of food.



Attractive displays of farm produce line the walls of Agricultural Hall. Willowhurst Farm won the individual farm exhibit competition in 1912.



Iowa State Historical Department, Des Moines

Fairgoers inspect Iowa's best vegetables.



Iowa State Historical Department, Des Moines

A thrilled winner in 1947.

A judge checks for the best ear of corn.

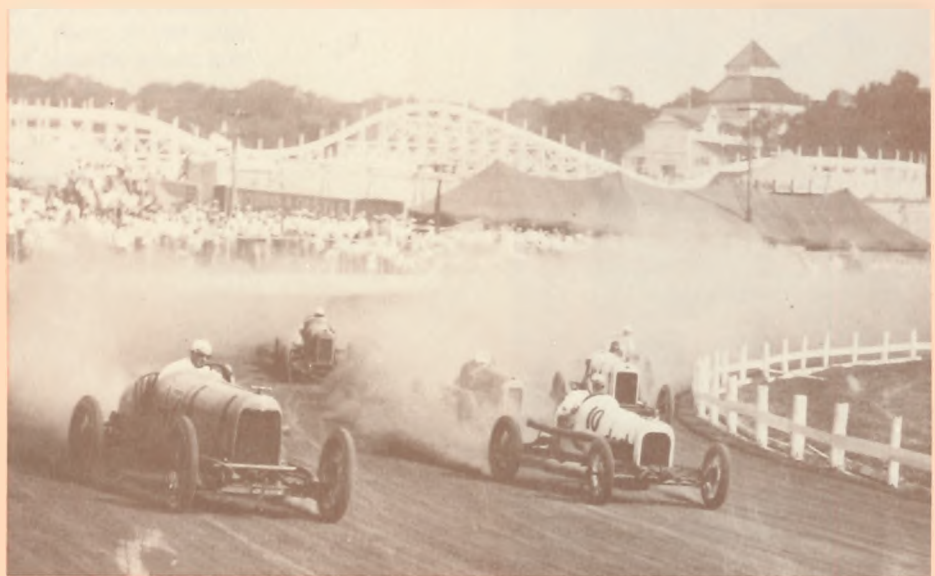
Iowa's farm men and women bring their best products to the fair. Inside Agricultural Hall, grains, meats, fruits, dairy products, vegetables, flowers, cakes, breads, jams, and canned foods await the judges' final decision.

Fun at the Fair



Harness racers round the turn at the state fairgrounds.

A good time is sought by all at the Iowa State Fair. In addition to the fine exhibits on display in the many buildings, fun and excitement can be found on the midway and at the grandstand. Although early fair programs featured farm skill demonstrations, speeches, and sometimes a band concert, it was the old sport of horse racing that quickly became a popular event. Speed continued to attract people to the grandstand after auto racing began in 1911. The addition of circus performances, wild west shows, vaudeville acts, and theatrical events has kept audiences delighted through the years.



An auto race at the 1929 Iowa State Fair. The roller coaster in the background was torn down in 1946.



When we think of the fair, we usually think of cotton candy, foot-long hot dogs, and all the other good foods we enjoy eating there. At the early fairs, most people didn't find the food served in the dining hall very tasty. Many people also avoided the untidy **concession** stands, which were only makeshift wooden structures or simple tents with dirt floors. Instead fairgoers often brought along a big picnic lunch to eat.

Eventually fair planners made rules requiring concession operators to keep their places clean and their food tasty. Concessionaires began to construct permanent buildings for restaurants. Sturdy wooden buildings with floors and small trailers soon replaced the makeshift concession stands. These new stands offered all the favorite foods, such as watermelon, sweet corn on the cob, and freshly-squeezed lemonade.

Today fairgoers can purchase these treats and many more at almost any of the three hundred concession stands located on the fairgrounds.



concession n. — a small business, usually selling food and drink.

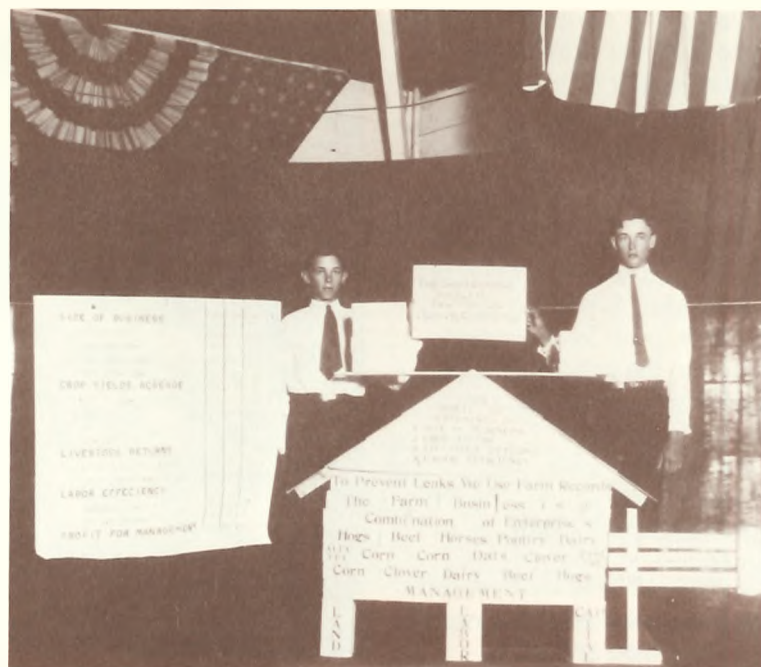


In 1916 nearly one thousand boys and girls entered the various 4-H livestock and grain competitions—a new feature at the Iowa State Fair.

Today many thousands of boys and girls across the state belong to 4-H clubs. Every year each member chooses a project designed to improve some area of homemaking or farming, such as raising a calf, canning fruits and vegetables, or raising grain. The members work on their projects throughout the year for entry in county fair competitions. The projects judged best at these county fairs become entries at the Iowa State Fair.

Each of these 4-H members goes to the fair, hoping to return with a blue ribbon honoring his or her efforts and hard work. But the fair does more than provide a chance to compete and exhibit skills. It is also a time to meet new people, exchange ideas, and make new friends.

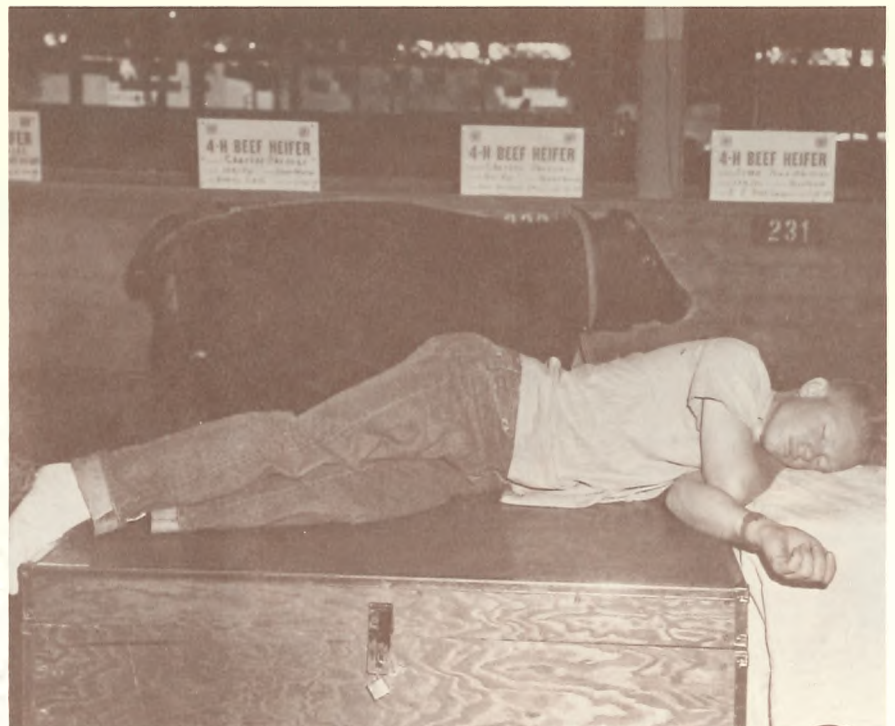
—Ingrid Aanensen





"I believe in the future of farming . . ." is the creed of the Future Farmers of America. The FFA is made up of high school students across the nation who are preparing for careers in agriculture. Each year the members of Iowa's FFA compete in livestock, mechanics, meat and grain contests, hold demonstrations and displays, and serve as ushers for grandstand events.

Iowa State Historical Department Del. Moities



The Campground

Most people attending the first state fair in Fairfield camped during their stay. The town was too small to have hotel rooms for all who came. Even if rooms had been available, most fairgoers did not have the money to pay for one. Instead, people pitched their tents or parked their wagons on the surrounding prairie lands.

At the end of each day the campground seemed to glow in the falling **dusk**, as hungry campers cooked dinner over campfires. As dusk faded,

dusk n. — the time of day when darkness begins.



people gathered around the fire, making new friends and exchanging ideas about raising livestock and grain, about homemaking, and about events of the day.

When Des Moines became the permanent fair location, a special tree-shaded area east of the fairgrounds was set aside for campers. Fair planners made campground improvements as the years passed, including concrete floors for tents, running water, public restrooms and showers, and electricity. Eventually large mobile homes and brightly colored nylon tents took the place of covered wagons and simple canvas shelters.

All Manner of Machines

"The fair gives farmers an excellent chance to study different types of silos. There were practically all types on the grounds."

Wallaces' Farmer, 1915.



"Tractor manufacturers are finding it profitable to demonstrate their goods at the fair. The average farmer wants to be sure before making the large investment a tractor calls for."

Wallaces' Farmer, 1915.



The increasing number of machinery exhibits caused the fair planners to decide on a permanent building to replace the canvas tents that stood over the machinery displays. In 1911 the new Machinery Hall opened. It covered six acres of land. New farm machinery, tools, and home appliances filled the hall for many years. As time passed, the building became a showcase for all of Iowa industry and it was renamed the Varied Industries Building in 1936.

In Machinery Hall Iowans also learned about new technology that would eventually affect their way of life. From this building the first state fair radio broadcast was beamed to Iowa homes. Later, in 1932, fairgoers watched the live broadcast and reception of a television program. Two years later an alcohol-gasoline blend for motor fuel was among the exhibits. The display demonstrated the blending process and explained how alcohol was manufactured from corn and other crops.

A FORDSON TRACTOR ON DISPLAY OUTSIDE MACHINERY HALL, ABOUT 1920.

One Step Further . . .

1. What has always been the main purpose of the fairs?
2. What features were most important at the early fairs?
3. As time went by, what features were added? What were the reasons for these additions?
4. What do you believe are the important features of the fair now? Give reasons for your choices. You and your classmates might disagree about this answer.
5. What products of the future were shown at the 1932 fair?
6. The Iowa State Fair has been called "Iowa's showcase." What areas of life in Iowa does the fair reflect?
7. Carefully read the Clay County Fair program on page 2. Imagine yourself at that fair and write a story telling about your day at the fair, based on the program.



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